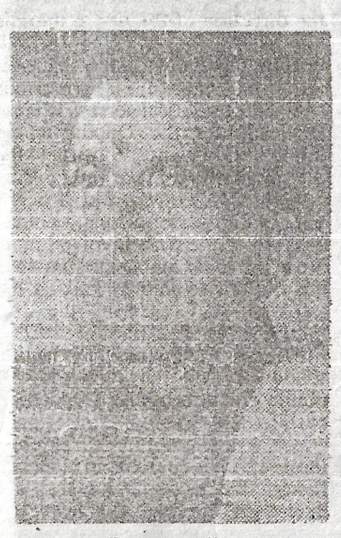
MARQUEE

LITERATURE

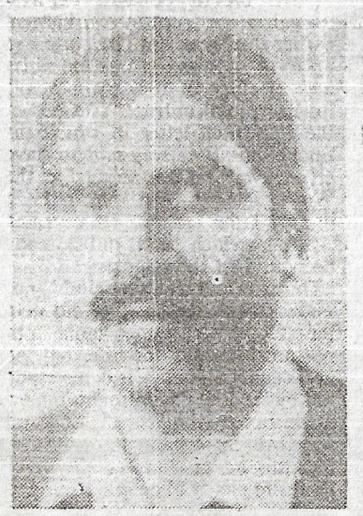
Alive, in the shadow of Goliath

Seven hundred copies of the Rajasthani anthology awarded by Sahitya Akademi this year were sold off as scrap. Is this peculiar to the languages left out of the Eighth Schedule? ***Nikhat Kazmi*** *asks the awardees*

Mohan Singh



Ramdeo Jha



Premji Prem

Mhari Kavitavan, a collection of 64 poems, wins the prestigious Sahitya Akademi award in Rajasthani this year. The doyens of the Akademi deem it an outstanding contribution to Rajasthani literature for its "use of metaphors, pungent sarcasm, precision of expression and authentic regional flavour of the Hadouti dialect." Time for applause, time to felicitate. But wait: *Mhari Kavitavan* was sold as *raddi* last December by a frustrated housewife who needed space for storing her much-accoladed husband's new literary gems.

"Last winter, my wife sold off 700 copies of this book which wins the award today to the local *raddiwala* since they had been lying unsold in the trunk for almost two years. I managed to sell only 100 copies. Tell me, did my wife have any choice? Tell me, wasn't she right in selling them off?" An insistent Premji Prem sets you thinking. Time for instrospection, perhaps.

"Six years ago," he continues, "when my daughter got married, I distributed sets of six of my books to all the guests. I had to create space for the next lot." Time for dismay, for alarm and consternation at this ironical situation where a literary genius that has been felicitated by the nation's premier literary institution, may perchance end up as paper bags to hold your vegetables in!

But who is to blame for this? Who must be held accountable? Not the writer who writes against all odds – falling readership, disappearing publishers, a marginalised library movement, non- functional state patronage and the hegemony of Hindi and English. Nor the Sahitya Akademi which strangely reflects constitutional egalitarianism in its unstinted approval of 22 Indian languages. Something which the Constitution itself denies in its Eighth Schedule.

States I.N. Choudhary, the Akademi's secretary: "Sahitya Akademi does its best to impress on the consciousness of the reading public that Indian literature, no matter which language it is written in, is the common heritage of all our people, and Sahitya Akademi is the Akademi of all the writers in this country dedicated to the creation of Indian literature." The fact is reflected in its annual dispensation where languages that are not yet in the Eighth Schedule co-exist with bigger, better protected, state promoted languages, even if in their shadow. These are the little Davids that dream of reaching Goliath's stature – if only the government would listen, if only it would care.

Hindi mari dadi ae,
Te Dogri ae ma,
Dadi thyar dadi ae,
Te mao thyare ma

(If Hindi is our grandmother, then Dogri is our mother; Grandmothers have their own place and mothers all their own) quotes Mohan Singh, the Dogri writer who won the award for his collection of plays, *Apni Daphli Apna Raag*. Mohan Singh smiles at the award and yet furrows up his brow in pain. "If all the citizens of this country are equal, then why aren't the languages spoken by the citizens equal too? As long as there is this *bhed- bhav* (distinction), writers like me will continue to be leaden- hearted despite the awards."

Dogri today boasts of many literateurs: Madhukar, Padma Sachdev, Narendra Rajwaria... Yet, when it comes to publishing, all these writers have to dig into their personal savings in order to reach out to the reader. This is a crunch shared by writers in almost all the languages left out of the Eighth schedule.

Mohan Singh (Dogri) spent Rs.12,000 to get his book published. Ramdeo Jha (Maithili) too had to publish his own book, *Pasjhaita Pathar*. Meena Kakodkar focuses attention on the abysmal lack of publishers and outlets in Konkani, while Premji Prem (Rajashtani) spent Rs. 9,500 for *Mhari Kavitavan*. Ajit Barua (Assamese) who writes "in order to purify the dialect of his tribe" accepts the Rs.25,000 award presented by the Akademi for his collection of poems, *Brahmaputra Hyadi Padya* and bemoans, "it is a pity that winning cash prizes is a necessity for one writing in languages like Assamese, for the number of speakers is very small."

Small wonder then that publishers are reluctant to publish his verse. The prize money will help him to recover part of the expenses he incurred, he says feeling indebted to the Akademi. This, when he has always been opposed to state patronage of culture. "I feel grateful to the state, and gratefulness -- especially in a person like me -- is a subtle, unconscious loss of freedom." For state patronage, he says, may result in "the arrest and deportation of many more Solzhenitsyns."

Even the degree and nature of state patronage is held suspect by awardees. And with good reason. It is mandatory for state Akademis to purchase a few copies of the awarded books. But the Rajasthani State Akademi library has yet to include the book it awarded him for in 1982, informs Premji Prem. And for his recent book, the Akademi doled out a paltry Rs. 3000.

Meena Kakodkar had written several letters to both the Goa Kala Akademi and the Konkani Akademi requesting them to subsidise, as stipulated, her collection of short stories, *Sapan Fulam*. But she has still to hear from them. "This is how the state Akademies are helping writers," she shrugs.

Ramdeo Jha voices the trauma of a writer who expresses himself in a rich language that unfortunately is the heritage of an impoverished region. Maithili is spoken in the underdeveloped, unemployment-ridden, poorly literate terrain of North Bihar. "Instead of buying my book, a person here would prefer to spend Rs. 20 on a textbook for his daughter," he pragmatically states. Obviously the Maithili Akademi too languishes in limbo born out of a paucity of funds. This however fails to dampen the creative urge. There's an unprecedented rise in enrolment to Mithila University's department of Maithili. "When it comes to the optional language, too, several more are opting for Maithili and not Hindi," points out Prof. Ramdeo.

Even a lesser known dialect like Hadouti, spoken in south-east Rajasthan, has almost 125 writers of import today, informs Premji Prem. Writers who write simply for the love of it, and thrive on the hope that "someday, when the means are there, when the funds are available, the words of wisdom shall see the light of day and the book shall reach the unknown reader," says Prof. Ramdeo.

But financial constraints are just one side of the picture. Political suppression and neglect is the other, uglier side. The Jammu State Akademi, according to Mohan Singh, should be concentrating all its promotional activities on the uplift of Dogri since cultural promotion in Kashmir is impossible now. But the Akademi is dormant. *"Uska nahin to inka kyon* (if not for Kashmiri then why for Dogri), this seems to be their motto," he explains.

"What do we do?" the playwright queries. "If we protest, we are labelled anti-Kashmiri. Our legitimate movement is viewed as a threat to national integrity. All we demand is the inclusion of Dogri in the Eighth schedule. After all, why are we not included and why are those that are there?"

Similar queries exercise writers of all languages that do not enjoy constitutional recognition. Queries that refuse to be quelled by awards, contained by certificates or covered with souvenier shawls. Instead they threaten to blow into storms of discontent. "No, we are not willing to give up this demand," stresses Prof. Ramdeo, "though we do not want to reach a situation akin to Punjab, Kashmir, Assam. No, we shall merely argue and request. But will such peaceful measures continue with the younger generation? They are more fiery, more aggressive, and extremely angry..."

Do we hear the alarm bells ring? Can we dream of unity in true and total diversity? Or must we rest with lopsided anachronisms where certain languages are -- to quote Premji Prem -- "languages of the Sahitya Akademi but not of the Indian constitution."